

Thursday, February 26, 2015  
RUFF 2, C II Turkey

President Kennedy had been convinced since Wednesday, Oct. 17 that if he had to attack the missiles in Cuba, the Soviets would almost surely retaliate by attacking our missiles in Turkey.

As the target date for attack approached, on Saturday afternoon, October 27, Harry Rowen was asked by Secretary McNamara for the ExComm to lay out alternative options for a U.S. response to a Soviet non-nuclear attack on the U.S. missiles assigned to NATO in Turkey.

Harry called me in to work on this with him, and the two of us sat at opposite sides of his desk, each writing on yellow pads as fast as we could.

The first option we presented was "No further U.S. response": in effect calling it "even," missiles destroyed in Turkey for missiles destroyed in Cuba, seeking to end hostilities there. We took some pride, I recall, in beginning with that, since we felt that few advisors in that era would have had the nerve even to include that as a policy option.

Along with the next one, to hit the single plane or missile site from which the Soviet attack had been launched, we thought these two options (the first being very unlikely to be adopted) were actually best, the only two unlikely to spur further escalations. But we weren't asked for recommendations, only for a range of alternatives.

The rest, all likely to be preferred by the JCS to these, followed fairly obviously. In ascending order: retaliate against one Soviet IRBM sites, or more than one. Or (especially if the Soviets had also attacked some of our bomber bases in Turkey) against several Soviet air bases in the region. If US aircraft were used for any of these, rather than ballistic or cruise missile, the JCS would demand attacks as well on the SAMs and air defenses in the area.

If there was a Soviet response—or, as the JCS undoubtedly would have recommended, even without it—the US could attack all the bases, missile sites and defenses in the region. Or even—Generals Power and LeMay could be counted on to recommend this—full-scale attack on the Soviet Union.

That was, after all, what Eisenhower's plan for general war—SIOP 62, operational until recently—called for in these circumstances, conflict between armed forces of the Soviet Union and the U.S. To be sure, Kennedy guidance (which I'd drafted) changed that. Yet it was pretty much what NATO policy documents had always prescribed: an attack on one, Turkey, was an attack on all, to be responded to as if it were an attack on the US directly.

And NATO planners and heads of state still rejected any notion of waging a war in Europe that treated the superpower homelands as sanctuaries; they still regarded deterrence as resting on an almost-immediate launching of a full US attack on the Soviet Union in response to any Soviet attack on an ally. (Only days earlier, after all, President Kennedy had

promised “full retaliation against the Soviet Union” as the response to a *single* IRBM fired from Cuba against the U.S.)

On the other hand, NATO planning and policy-making had never contemplated circumstances exactly like the premise of our draft options: armed hostilities initiated by the US against Soviet forces inside the territory of a Soviet ally. Some restraint in responding to a limited Soviet retaliation to that might seem in order. But not to SAC, or USAF, or the JCS.

LeMay, in fact, would be sure to point out that if there were ever to be an occasion to disarm the Soviet Union—before they finally built up their missile forces to the scale SAC had been predicting for years—the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was that time, perhaps the last. A Soviet attack on a NATO ally—no matter what the provocation, or the views of our European allies—would be an irresistible occasion for it, in the eyes of SAC and LeMay, perhaps all of the Chiefs.

But Harry and I weren't very worried that any of our options would come to pass, even the precursor to them, a Soviet attack on Turkey. I believed it very unlikely that the Soviets would risk hitting our missiles in Turkey even if we did attack theirs in Cuba. (On that point, though I didn't know it at the time, I was for once in agreement with Curtis LeMay.) We couldn't understand why Kennedy thought otherwise.

Why did he seem actually sure (as the word came down to us) that the Soviets would respond to an attack on their missiles in Cuba, if it came to that, by armed moves against Turkey or Berlin? We wondered if—after his campaigning in 1960 against a supposed “missile gap”—he had never really absorbed what the strategic balance really was, or its implications.

In the fall of 1962 the U.S. had several hundred intercontinental, intermediate-range and sub-launched warheads and three thousand bombers within range of the Soviet Union. On the other side, the Soviets had at that time about *ten* operational ICBM's within range of the United States<sup>1</sup> aside from the highly vulnerable missiles on Cuba, and about a hundred and fifty to a hundred and ninety intercontinental bombers.

As I saw it, and I presumed he did, Khrushchev was just as outgunned in strategic nuclear forces as he was, obviously, in conventional terms in the Caribbean. That meant to me that he *had* to back down. The long, secret letter from him that I'd read the night before told me that he understood that. What some others in the ExComm (it came out later) had read as panicky on his part (Dean Acheson described it in print as “hysterical”) I saw as sober and realistic. Khrushchev had his feet on the ground, and he knew when a gamble had failed.

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<sup>1</sup> As I was told then, confidentially; later estimates have put it at forty, although there seems to remain uncertainty about just how many of the sixty-odd second-generation ICBMs then under construction in the Soviet Union were really operational by October.



Ever since Wednesday morning—when contrary to his threats on Tuesday Khrushchev chose not to challenge the blockade line—I hadn't believed it would be necessary to carry out an air strike in order to get rid of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Neither did Harry. I still didn't as we worked together on Saturday to take account of that possibility.

Nor did I believe it was necessary even to consider Walter Lippman's suggestion Thursday morning of trading away our missiles in Turkey, an option which (like the majority of the Excom, it turned out) I strongly opposed for reasons of NATO solidarity.

That remained my view despite the Saturday morning message that took up Lippman's proposal. Nitze relayed to us the sense from the ExComm that it represented a last-ditch bargaining move dictated by hard-liners in the Kremlin, presumably in opposition to his own inclination the night before to concede. Khrushchev could probably overrule that, if he remained in control. And Kennedy apparently was banking on that, having decided calmly to ignore that tough demand for a trade in favor of accepting the Friday night message, with no mention of our missiles in Turkey, as the ruling proposal.

All this was thrown in question by the gradual confirmation, during the afternoon, that a SAC U-2 over Cuba which had been out of communication since the morning had, in fact, been shot down by a Soviet-manned SAM. And, on the US side, by President Kennedy's decision not to respond: contrary to his assurances to the JCS that any shoot-down of a reconnaissance plane would lead to immediate US attacks on the attacking air defense sites and possibly more. That presidential reticence—or as some military we were working with saw it, dismaying weakness-- was explained as a desire not to derail Soviet acceptance of his latest proposal (which was sent before the attack on the U-2 had been confirmed).

But while the ExComm awaited a Kremlin response, and working groups kept working on plans for air attacks and an invasion now scheduled for two days away, a more ominous signal came down to in the ISA offices. Harry was given a new task, which he passed on to me. This one came straight from McNamara.

I was to draft cables to our ambassador in Turkey, Raymond Hare<sup>i</sup> and to our Ambassador to NATO, conveying a presidential decision to remove the US IRBMs from Turkey, and "replace" them with Polaris submarines assigned to NATO in the eastern Mediterranean. As I understood the purpose of these drafts, this was to alert the ambassadors to the possibility, or likelihood, that a presidential decision to this effect would presently be forthcoming.

The brief instructions Harry passed on were that the Turks should be told that this would protect them from being targeted by the Soviets, if the crisis escalated, and that the Polaris submarines were a better deterrent to attack on Turkey or NATO than the IRBMs, which were vulnerable and a veritable lightning rod for attack.

I was appalled. I had been given a file of previous cable exchanges with both ambassadors, on the subject of a possible missile trade—missiles being removed from both Turkey and Cuba--and I was entirely convinced by the ambassadors'

judgments that this would have a devastating effect on our relations with the Turks and with other NATO governments in general.

The Turks, Hare had said in more than one cable, were proud of the possession of the IRBMs, and rather than being fearful of their targetability, they were particularly proud that these missiles put them on “the very front line” of the NATO military posture. “These are now Turkish missiles,” Hare said. Indeed, “ownership” of the missiles (though not of the warheads, which the US supposedly controlled) had been formally transferred to the Turks, which made US unilateral reclaiming of them of questionable legality. The Turks had no desire or intention of giving them up: least of all under Soviet threat.

Moreover, if the US were seen as disarming NATO of “its” weapons in the face of Soviet threats, it would appear to all of NATO that the US was sacrificing the “defense” of Europe—its deterrent posture-- in the interests of US security. It would be understood as the precursor to a trade-off of the NATO missiles for the removal of the Soviet missiles on Cuba that threatened the continental US, even though the White House and McNamara proposed to give no hint of this possibility at this time. This “precaution” they were taking—to keep the missiles from being attacked (and secretly, to keep them from being fired by the Turks)-- was itself more than a hint of that.

This would be taken by de Gaulle, and not only by him, as confirming what he had been saying for some time: that the US could not be trusted to put European interests with respect to security above its perception of its own security. Leadership of the alliance—which had always amounted to US hegemony—might be lost to de Gaulle or a combination of France and Germany, the alliance itself might begin to dissolve. And Khrushchev could take advantage of this demoralization to press hard on Berlin.

All this made sense to me. (Although I didn’t know it at the time, these same arguments had been pressed on Kennedy that very morning by McGeorge Bundy and others, persuading him to give up—at least for that moment—his inclination to accept Khrushchev’s proposal Saturday morning of a public trade).

Nevertheless, I tried to craft language that would meet McNamara’s directive to make the best case possible for the move, pretending that it was in the interest of the Turks themselves, not just the US—this in the face of Hare’s reports that any such action would destroy their trust in the US and the alliance.

I was usually pretty fast at drafting language when I agreed with the thrust of the argument—that was a major part of my job, and of my talents, as a consultant from RAND in DC—but I found this agonizingly slow going. I typed lines and paragraphs, tore the paper out and threw it away, tried again. I simply didn’t believe what I was writing, and I hated doing it.



It was a bureaucrat's job, elaborating positions that had been dictated from above, even when you strongly disagreed with them personally. That wasn't what I had ever come to Washington from California to do. I was a RAND consultant, not an official, not an employee.

I thought of saying I simply couldn't (wouldn't) do it, leaving the building if necessary—going back to California--but I put that out of my mind, because it would have seriously embarrassed Harry Rowen with Nitze and McNamara. It was Harry who had brought me there and vouched for me. I tried to do it for him, not for them. But I wasn't getting anywhere.

I was thinking, of Kennedy and McNamara, in real anguish, "*They're blowing it.*" The president was going to take away the Turkish missiles. He was going to make the deal that Khrushchev demanded that morning. He was going to snatch defeat—break-up of the NATO alliance, yielding on Berlin as well as Cuba—from the jaws of victory. I felt sure Khrushchev was on the verge of giving way.

He had to: invasion was just two days away, he couldn't let the missiles be destroyed and his troops captured. Any countermove in Europe held too great a risk of escalation. He had to back down. I'd read his letter the night before. Others, later, said they had read it as panicky, hysterical. I read it as sober, facing reality. Khrushchev had his feet on the ground. I wasn't expecting any invasion or attack to take place; it wouldn't be necessary.

Until this. Kennedy was backing off, disastrously, *when he didn't have to.*

At one point, Paul Nitze (who I rarely saw during this week, though I'd slept on the couch in his office the night before) came by the desk where I was writing and asked, "How's it going?"

Uncharacteristically, I answered that query candidly: "Not so well. Slowly." I remember feeling very tired, as well as frustrated. My mind was turning slowly. Everybody was getting tired.

I said to him: "I can't stand writing logic that *Turks* can pick apart." I said "Turks" with full chauvinistic stigma,, and I wasn't kidding.

He said, "Well, keep at it," and walked off.

I kept at it. Half an hour later, Harry came by and put me out of my misery. He said McNamara had drafted the cables himself. It was embarrassing. Nitze must have told him he didn't have it yet. But I was relieved. Harry said to go home, and I went back to the hotel.

I've never forgotten my thoughts as I looked at my face in the mirror above the bathroom sink in my hotel room, clutching the sink in my hands. It was half dark, lit

only from the bedroom behind me. I was feeling a kind of horror. I felt I had just been part of something shameful, a transaction that shamed my country. The words were almost aloud in my head as I looked at the mirror:

"I'm never coming back here. I'm never going to be in this position again. I had to do this, try to do this, for Harry—he was under orders, it was his job--but I'm not working for Harry any more. I'm done. I'm not coming back to this town."

I took off my clothes and fell into bed. The next morning, Sunday, I got up late. I had breakfast at the hotel and wandered into the ISA offices in the Pentagon about ten o'clock.

Everyone was celebrating, looking bemused. There'd been an announcement on the radio from Moscow an hour earlier that Khrushchev was in the process of removing the missiles from Cuba. He'd accepted Kennedy's proposal of the afternoon before. No mention of missiles in Turkey.

It was pretty much what I'd expected, before last night. I was glad to hear it, but I wasn't so surprised as the others, and I didn't feel any great jubilation. I felt relief, like everyone, but for a different reason: that McNamara's draft cables hadn't been acted on. I checked to see if they had gone out the previous night, and apparently they hadn't. Someone had held them back, saving the day, as I saw it.

The NATO ministers were meeting at that moment, and the initial reports were that they were all joyously congratulating the US for standing firm and triumphing. The Turks were especially happy, and proud.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is now, and has been for decades, regarded as having been the most dangerous episode in the history of humanity, the one with the greatest chance of an all-out nuclear war (and as we now know, nuclear winter, near-extinction of humanity).

Many, including former Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, see it as the *only* time in the cold war that nuclear war was really risked.<sup>ii</sup> That seems doubtful. It's true that in other nuclear crises, such as Berlin, neither leader had any intention to let events get out of his hands to the point of his actually initiating or provoking nuclear war. But that was also true of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when nuclear war, we now recognize, came extremely close to escaping the control of either leader! And some threats of one-sided nuclear war were neither bluffs nor certain to prevail. (See Vietnam 1969).



How likely was nuclear war in the Cuban crisis? Estimates, based on different methodologies and premises, and above all on differing states of information evolving over time, have varied widely, both up and down over time. In a later chapter, I'll address how information I didn't have in 1962, or in my study of the crisis in 1964, has affected (upward) my own appraisal of this risk, and its bearing on future dangers.

But to put that in context, let me address how I saw it myself at the time as a participant. (Not to magnify my role: I could say it was as a low-level participant—with zero influence on events--yet with rare access for someone of my pay-grade, working just below the ExComm, for one of its members (Nitze)).

It was not, in fact, one of my best episodes. I was much too confident—to a point that would have been catastrophic, had I been a decision-maker—of judgments that were, in reality, mistaken. In that respect, ironically, I was like the JCS, even LeMay, though our attitudes towards the importance of avoiding nuclear war—our willingness to accept a given risk of it-- were polar opposites.

In short, I thought during the crisis (the five days of it I was in the Pentagon, starting Wednesday, October 24) that the likelihood of armed conflict was actually low, and the probability of nuclear war extremely low, near zero. Thus I was far from sharing the mood of desperation and even panic that gripped much of the public in America and the world (which I now see as more justified than I thought at the time, and more realistic than mine). That needs explaining.

Harry Rowen and I knew well something that most others did not, or had not absorbed: the true balance of intercontinental nuclear forces between the Soviet Union and the US, the reverse of the missile-gap myth of 1958-60. As I've described above, in terms of numbers it favored the US by over ten-to-one. In terms of ICBMs alone, the Soviets had less than a dozen, the US over 200 (with close to three thousand bombers in range of the Soviet Union, the Soviets less than 200).

Facing that near-monopoly of U.S. strategic nuclear power against the Soviet Union, it was *inconceivable* to us that Khrushchev would initiate nuclear operations under almost any circumstances. (As we'll see, that was a potentially fatal misjudgment). Indeed, I was confident, that Khrushchev "had" to back down, even short of armed hostilities in the Caribbean, where our conventional superiority was even greater.

It was in that belief I had backed the blockade—an act of war which clearly did risk hostilities from its onset--and also the implicit threat of an air strike, which seemed likely to me to cause the Soviets to withdraw. In short, I didn't think it would be necessary to carry out an air strike in order to get rid of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Nor, as I've recounted above, did I believe it would be necessary to trade away our missiles in Turkey.

I knew these hopeful judgments could be wrong. Our threats and preparations might fail to force a withdrawal of the Soviet missiles.<sup>iii</sup> But if, on Monday or Tuesday, a U.S. air strike then did take place and if the Soviets did, against all odds, recklessly confront us in Berlin or Turkey or at sea, one thing was unequivocally clear both to Harry Rowen and me: *the U.S. should not initiate nuclear war under any circumstances*, no matter what threats it might have made.

Based on the conversation I've described that I had with Secretary McNamara in 1961--which I had been warned afterward by his assistant to keep entirely to myself ("even from Harry Rowen")--I believed that he and the President shared this view to the hilt, in contrast to their public, official statements. This was a key basis for my strong sense of personal loyalty to McNamara.

What this added up to was that the Soviets seemed to us likely to back down to U.S. firm non-nuclear threats, and even if they did not, there was almost no chance that either side would resort to nuclear weapons. We presumed that was also the attitude of the President and his lieutenants on the ExComm.

We knew, of course, that a large part of the public, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, thought otherwise. But the basic reason for our own confidence, as I've said above, was our awareness of the overwhelming strategic nuclear superiority of the United States. And that, we knew, was not nearly so clear to the public. For good reason. They'd been misled, not least by Kennedy himself.

After all, Kennedy had run for election in 1960 largely on the issue of a supposed "missile gap" favoring the Soviets. When he had discovered in office, in the fall of 1961 (not earlier, as often supposed), that the real missile and bomber gap was grossly in favor of the U.S., being a politician he didn't make a dramatic effort to inform the public of just how wrong he had been. As a result, the public didn't realize--indeed, the reality was still highly classified--how very little the Soviets actually had in the way of nuclear forces threatening the U.S.

Our knowledge of this secret reality, unshared with the world public, gave us (unjustified) confidence that the crisis decision-making we were engaged in supporting was not all that dangerous, not nearly so much as most Americans or critics of American policy (like Bertrand Russell) supposed. Thus our views in 1962--without defending them here--were at least consistent with our support of the threatening posture and active "pressures" the ExComm had chosen from the beginning.

We assumed that the ExComm members we were serving in a staff role thought much the same way. Indeed, my notes reveal that sometime during that week, Harry Rowen remarked to me, "I think the Executive Committee puts the chance of nuclear war very low, though they still may overestimate it by ten times. They may put it at 1 in 100."

He himself, he told me when I asked, would have said the odds were "1 in 1000."



But the day after the crisis ended, on Monday, October 29, he informed me that his boss, Paul Nitze, had just told him that *he* had put the chance of some form of nuclear war, if we had struck the missiles on Cuba, as "fairly high." And his estimate of the risk, Nitze thought, was "the lowest in the ExComm; everyone else put it higher." (This wasn't correct, according to some of the participants later accounts).

Harry had asked him what odds he would have given. Nitze's answer, Harry said, was: "1 in 10."

I remember vividly my reaction, that Monday, to this report. It came in two phases.

First, puzzlement: why would they put the risk that high? How could they figure that either side was that ready to go to nuclear war? Ten times higher than Harry had supposed of them; a hundred times higher than Harry's own estimate! Could it be that Nitze and the others, like the public, had not really absorbed the new intelligence on the strategic balance, or that they didn't fully believe it?

Second reaction, slightly delayed: "*One in ten?! Of nuclear war? And we were doing what we were doing?!*"

What "the U.S. had been doing," by order of the ExComm, included: (1) the blockade itself, with possible armed resistance by Soviet ships; (2) forcing Soviet submarines to surface; (3) high-level and low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba; (4) a large-scale airborne alert with significant risk of accidents involving nuclear weapons, or a Russian false alarm; (5) continuing low-level reconnaissance over Cuba, even after several planes were fired on and one shot down on Saturday; (6) "normal" operations, that risked Soviet false alarms, continuing during the crisis, including test-firing of an ICBM from Vandenberg and U-2 "weather" flights over the Pole (one of which had gone off-course, into Soviet airspace); and (7) full preparations--if they were wholly a bluff, they fooled me--for invasion and airstrike.

I myself believed that the stakes in this confrontation, in global political terms, were quite high. I was prepared to support non-nuclear threats, willing even to risk or if necessary conduct conventional conflict in the Caribbean. I was, in short, a cold warrior working for the Pentagon.

But to be willing to take actions as provocative of the Soviet Union as these, while estimating a ten percent chance of thermonuclear war?! In order to avoid a public trade of the Turkish missiles for the missiles in Cuba?

Who were these people I was working for? Were the civilians no better than the military? Were they all insane?

It was a moment in my life like that in 1961, the year before, when I had looked at a chart that showed the Joint Chiefs of Staff expected their plans for general war to inflict six hundred million deaths. That had told me to put my hopes for human survival on their civilian superiors.

Now this purported to show me the measure of those civilians, from one of their colleagues. Must I believe what it seemed to say about them—and about our overall human prospects? That was a question that I pushed to the back of my mind, as events moved on. That same week I was reminded of the real gap between the civilian leaders and their military commanders, the urgency of civilian control. Within a day or two of the conversation with Harry, word had filtered down to us of the confrontation between President Kennedy and the JCS the previous day, Sunday, after word had arrived that Khrushchev was removing the missiles.

The Chiefs, we learned, especially LeMay, were skeptical that that promise would be kept, and in any case took the cancellation of the invasion plans as a US failure, a “defeat.” LeMay had come close to accusing the Command-in-Chief to his face of cowardice or treason. And he had recommended strongly that the air attack be carried out immediately, whether the missiles were being removed by the Soviets or not!

This in face of the fact that the Chiefs themselves had accepted the CIA estimate that all the MRBMs on Cuba had achieved operational status by Saturday, the day before. Earlier no one had challenged McNamara’s dictum throughout the crisis that an attack on the missiles could occur only before they became operational (lest one or more be launched under attack, against the U.S.) Now the Chiefs as a body, led by LeMay, seemed to be accepting the real possibility, or likelihood, that a US air attack—which they continued to propose in the following weeks as the Cubans resisted giving up the Il-28 bombers—would result in nuclear explosions on US cities.<sup>2</sup>

LeMay paid no price for his show of extreme disrespect to the president (though the Chief of Naval Operations George Anderson was fired by McNamara right afterwards—while his picture was on the cover of Time Magazine, as the hero of the successful blockade—for comparable insubordination toward him during the crisis. That was tempered by appointing him Ambassador to Portugal.<sup>iv</sup> But the episode confirmed my nightmare epiphany of the year before: that the JCS were mad dogs that could only be reined in by the president and secretary of defense, whatever their own human limitations.

And how to understand those latter limitations? To a considerable extent, I’ve spent the rest of my life striving to that question. How to comprehend the origins and the implications of the two revelations mentioned above, among a handful of others: that our military chiefs constructed and maintained, and under some circumstances were actually willing to launch, a doomsday machine (which they came close to recognizing as such; and that our civilian leaders were recurrently willing to gamble, for domestic and international stakes, that it might be triggered, at least once with “fairly high—ten percent” probability.

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<sup>2</sup> The CIA didn’t know for sure whether nuclear warheads had arrived in Cuba for either the missiles or the Il-28’s—in fact, they had, for both—but all agreed that “it must be assumed that nuclear warheads were present.” Whether the JCS fully did believe this isn’t known; but they had no basis for assuming otherwise.



I would have had the same reaction I did to Nitze's Monday-morning retrospective if I'd known at that time what the official I most admired, Robert McNamara, was thinking as he left the White House two nights earlier, Saturday night, October 27th<sup>v</sup>.

He said later that he was admiring the beautiful fall sunset as he left the Oval Office for the Pentagon, and "I thought I might never live to see another Saturday night."

## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Hare was the father of Paul Hare, who was a close friend of mine three years later in the Saigon Embassy, where he was a young political officer. I learned from Wikipedia that my life had intersected with that of Paul's father's earlier. He was a newly-arrived Ambassador to Egypt during the Suez Crisis, when I was the assistant operations officers of a Marine battalion with the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. "During his initial days in Egypt, Hare oversaw the evacuation of U.S. citizens from Egypt." My ship, the U.S.S. Chilton, was the main recipient of the 1100 U.S. citizens who were evacuated.

<sup>ii</sup> 5-7-98, [http://articles.mcall.com/1998-05-07/news/3200556\\_1\\_comrade-stalin-soviet-youth-diplomat](http://articles.mcall.com/1998-05-07/news/3200556_1_comrade-stalin-soviet-youth-diplomat)

Dobrynin gets honorary degree at Kutztown University:

Viral Amin, 22, of Quakertown, a Kutztown student with a minor in Russian, asked Dobrynin to assess his era.

The Cold War was a waste, he told students who were too young to remember it, with billions spent on an arms race by both countries. In the end, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to destroy many of the nuclear warheads.

"The most important thing accomplished by Soviet-American diplomacy," Dobrynin said, "was that we avoided nuclear war."

Only during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Dobrynin said, was there any real threat of nuclear war.

<sup>iii</sup> If that had been the case by late on Sunday, with a contingently-planned US air attack and invasion only a day away, I believe I would have strongly preferred a public trade of the missiles to carrying out that threat. At least, I hope I would have.

Not because I thought nuclear war would have been at all likely (though it was) nor because I failed to expect US victory in Cuba (though it was far less assured than we thought—against 20,000 Soviet troops beyond our highest estimates, and guerrilla war in Cuba we were even less prepared for than in Vietnam three years later-- even if it didn't go nuclear). But because I believe I would have feared, even then, that any conventional war could get out of hand, and any non-zero chance of nuclear war was too much to accept.



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My anguish about making a deal on the missiles as of Saturday night reflected my belief that it was premature by at least twenty-four hours, and that a Khrushchev back-down was likely during that period (as seemed to be confirmed the next morning: misleadingly).

I now believe, as we'll see later, that President Kennedy was privately (from all but Rusk, perhaps even from his own brother) thinking along exactly the same lines that Saturday night. Both of us more sensible, as I see it, than the rest of the ExComm, in our willingness to concede if the threats didn't work: and both of us willing, unconscionably, to play Russian Roulette one more time, one more day, with more bullets in the chamber than we knew.

<sup>iv</sup> McNamara told his son-in-law, Robert Pastor, that he had simultaneously recommended firing LeMay to the president but that Kennedy told him to choose one—he couldn't dismiss two, for political reasons-- and McNamara picked Anderson. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/DC-Decoder/2012/1016/Cuban-Missile-Crisis-the-3-most-surprising-things-you-didn-t-know/The-Cuban-Missile-Crisis-almost-caused-a-US-military-coup>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-10/mcnamara3.html>

INT: Could I ask you, then - final question - I know we've discussed this before, but it's just fascinating to find out... In your own personal opinion - and I know there are others who disagree with you - how close did we come to nuclear war in October 1962?

RM: No, I'm not going to answer that. It's already answered...

INT: OK, fair enough. Could I ask you, then: was there a worst moment for you during that crisis, was there a moment where you really thought you were facing a hopeless situation?

RM: Well, at the time, the CIA reported that the best... to their judgement, there were no nuclear warheads on the island. But President Kennedy and I knew they might be wrong and there might be nuclear warheads there. Moreover, even if there weren't, if we engaged in military action against the Soviets in Cuba, we believe there was certainly a significant likelihood - and I would say a probability - of Soviet military action against NATO somewhere in the world and we were determined to try to avoid that if we possibly could. As of Saturday night, the Saturday before the Sunday, the 24th of October [sic: 28<sup>th</sup>], when Khrushchev announced publicly he was withdrawing them, **I was leaving the White House whatever, around dusk, to go back to my office in the Pentagon. It was a perfectly beautiful night, as fall nights are in Washington. I walked out of the President's Oval Office, and as I walked out I thought I might never live to see another Saturday night.** Now I don't want to be melodramatic or exaggerated, or imply then that I knew there were nuclear warheads there - I didn't - but I knew that it was a very, very risky situation, and I felt, as I know President Kennedy did, that it was our job to try to minimise that risk, and I wasn't at all sure we'd succeed.

INT: A personal note, sir. When you heard Khrushchev's radio announcement on the 28th, what was your reaction?

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RM: Of course, the reaction was immense relief.

INT: Mr McNamara, thank you very much indeed.

RM: Thank you.



US against Soviet forces inside the territory of a Soviet ally. Some restraint in responding to a limited Soviet retaliation to that might seem in order. But not to SAC, or USAF, or the JCS. LeMay would be sure to point out that if there were ever to be an occasion to disarm the Soviet Union—before they finally built up their missile forces to the scale SAC had been predicting for years—the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was that time, perhaps the last. A Soviet attack on a NATO ally—no matter what the provocation, or the views of our European allies—would be an irresistible occasion for it, in the eyes of SAC and LeMay, perhaps all of the Chiefs.

But Harry and I weren't very worried that any of our options would come to pass, even the precursor to them, a Soviet attack on Turkey. I believed it very unlikely that the Soviets would risk hitting our missiles in Turkey even if we did attack theirs in Cuba. We couldn't understand why Kennedy thought otherwise. Why did he seem sure (as the word came down to us) that the Soviets would respond to an attack on their missiles in Cuba, if it came to that, by armed moves against Turkey or Berlin? We wondered if—after campaigning in 1960 against a supposed "missile gap"—he had never really absorbed what the strategic balance really was, or its implications.

In the fall of 1962 the U.S. had several hundred intercontinental, intermediate-range and sub-launched warheads and three thousand bombers within range of the Soviet Union. On the other side, the Soviets had at that time about *ten* operational ICBM's within range of the United States<sup>1</sup> aside from the highly vulnerable missiles on Cuba, and about a hundred and fifty to a hundred and ninety intercontinental bombers.

Given that, and the attitudes known to us of Kennedy and McNamara, Harry and I were even more confident that the chance of nuclear war erupting from this confrontation was extremely low. We presumed that was also the attitude of the President and his lieutenants on the EcComm.

We knew, of course, that a large part of the public, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, thought otherwise. But the basic reason for our own confidence was our awareness of the overwhelming strategic nuclear superiority of the United States. And that, we knew, was not nearly so clear to the public.

After all, Kennedy had run for election in 1960 largely on the issue of a supposed "missile gap" favoring the Soviets. When he had discovered in office, in the fall of 1961, that the real missile (and bomber) gap was grossly in favor of the U.S., he did not make a dramatic effort to inform the public of just how wrong he had been. As a result, the public did not realize--indeed, the reality was still highly classified--how very little the Soviets actually had in the way of nuclear forces threatening the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> As I was told then, confidentially; later estimates have put it at forty, although there seems to remain uncertainty about just how many of the sixty-odd second-generation ICBMs then under construction in the Soviet Union were really operational by October.

Facing that near-monopoly of U.S. strategic nuclear power against the Soviet Union, it was inconceivable to me that Khrushchev would initiate nuclear operations under almost any circumstances. And under Kennedy and McNamara, I was sure that was equally true on our side, despite our numerical superiority.

On the one hand, I was confident, "Khrushchev *had* to back down." Outgunned as he was in the Caribbean, and equally outgunned in strategic nuclear terms, I didn't think it would be necessary to carry out an air strike in order to get rid of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Nor did I believe it would be necessary to trade away our missiles in Turkey, an option which (like the majority of the ExComm, it turned out later) I strongly opposed for reasons of NATO solidarity.

Even an air strike did take place and if the Soviets did, against all odds, recklessly confront us in Europe or at sea, one thing was unequivocally clear to Rowen and me: the U.S. should not initiate nuclear war under any circumstances, no matter what threats it might have made.

Based on a conversation I had had with Secretary McNamara in 1961--which I had been warned afterward to keep entirely to myself--I believed that he and the President shared this view (in contrast to their public, official statements). This was a key basis for my strong sense of personal loyalty to McNamara.

What this added up to was that the Soviets seemed to us likely to back down to U.S. firm non-nuclear threats, and even if they did not, there was almost no chance that either side would resort to nuclear weapons.

In that belief I backed the blockade, and the implicit threat of an air strike, which seemed likely to me to cause the Soviets to withdraw. Indeed,

Thus our views in 1962--without defending them here--were at least consistent with our support of the fairly threatening posture and active "pressures" the Excom had chosen from the beginning. We assumed that the Excom members we were serving in a staff role thought much the same way. Indeed, my notes reveal that sometime during that week, Harry Rowen remarked to me, "I think the Executive Committee puts the chance of nuclear war very low, though they still may overestimate it by ten times. They may put it at 1 in 100."

He himself would have said the odds were "1 in 1000."